Customize Windows: Start With The Basics

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It's your computer. You're the one who uses it day after day. So why should it look and act exactly like every other computer on the planet? It shouldn't. Instead, it should look and act the way you want it to. It's easy and fun to customize Windows, and that's what this issue's feature section is all about: showing you how to tailor Windows to fit your needs.

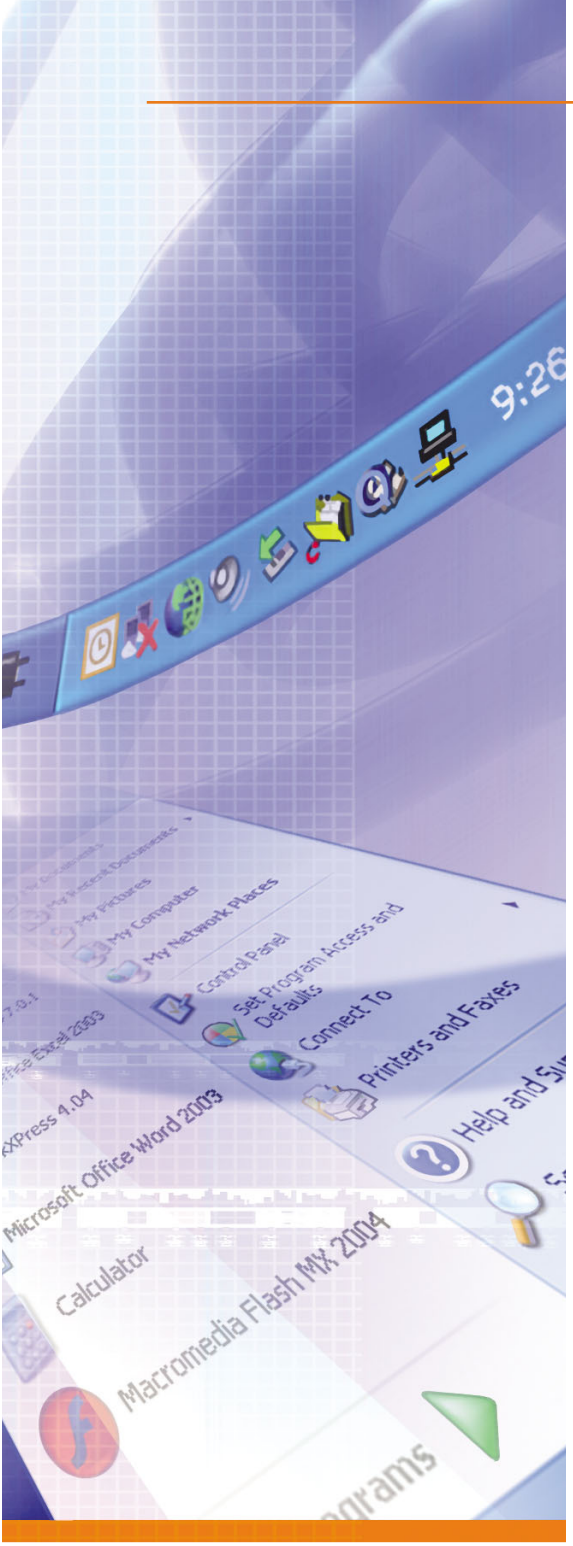
The biggest benefit of customizing Windows is that you can make the OS work exactly the way you want it to work, which can save you time and frustration. An important side benefit is simply developing a homey, lived-in feeling that can make the computer a more comfortable tool.

After all, you wouldn't buy a house then leave all of the walls stark white and the carpet its original, nonoffensive beige. You would want to spice the place up with your own color, texture, and style choices. Take some time to add your own style to Windows, and your PC will soon be as comfortable as your home.

Get Started

Are you ready to start customizing? There's no better place to start than the Start menu.

Microsoft introduced the Start menu in Windows 95, and 10 years later we have all grown accustomed to using it. We have even come to take the



Start menu for granted because this gateway to all of the programs on our computers, the Control Panel, the network, and just about everything else, is always available in the lower left corner of our displays (unless, of course, you move it).

But you don't have to take the Windows XP Start menu for granted. Start using it in style.

Begin by right-clicking the Start menu and choosing Properties. This reveals the Taskbar And Start Menu Properties dialog box. (You can also reach this dialog box by choosing Taskbar And Start Menu from the Control Panel.) Under the Start Menu tab, you will see two radio buttons: Start Menu and Classic Start Menu. The former is the default, the Start menu's familiar WinXP look and feel.

The WinXP Start Menu

We will look first at the default Start menu and then we will explore the Classic Start menu later in the article.

General settings. Click the Customize button directly across from the Start Menu option. In the Customize Start Menu dialog box, select the General tab. The first option you encounter is one that lets you change the size of the Start menu's icons. Choosing smaller icons saves you a lot of screen space (which is important on smaller monitors) and makes the system appear more conservative.

Under the Programs heading, you can change the number of recently used programs the Start menu displays. If the default of six entries is not enough, you can crank it up to as high as 30 entries to make sure all of your favorite programs remain in the list. Or you can reduce the number of programs to as few as zero to reduce the on-screen clutter.

If your program list ever grows too large and you want to quickly clear the list, simply click the Clear List button.

You can also use the Customize Start Menu dialog box to remove the Internet Explorer and Outlook Express icons from the menu or, even better, replace them with the browser and email client of your choice. Common email alternatives are Outlook Express and Hotmail.

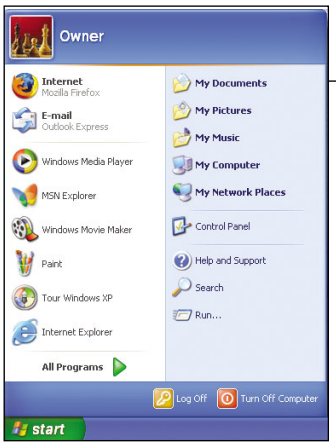
Advanced settings. For additional Start menu tweaks, you can click the Advanced tab. Under Start Menu Settings, uncheck the Highlight Newly Installed Programs checkbox to disable the Start menu's habit of highlighting newly added program folders and subfolders. Or uncheck Open Submenus When I Pause On Them With My Mouse to disable this Start menu option. (If you disable this option, you have to click items in the Start menu to see their submenus.)

In the center of the Advanced tab under the Start Menu Items heading, you will find numerous customization options. In this list, you can choose whether your Control Panel, My Computer, My Documents, My Music, My Pictures, and Network Connections icons display as links (the default setting) or submenus, or you can choose not to display any icons at all.

This area also lets you add a Favorites menu, disable drag-and-drop (that is, the ability to drag shortcut icons to and from the Start menu), and add a link to the System Administrative Tools utility. You can use this area, too, to remove common icons from the Start menu, such as the ones for Printers And Faxes, Search, and the Run command, which opens the Run dialog box.

One last nifty option under Start Menu Items is Scrolled Programs. By default, when you click items on the All Programs menu, submenus unfold horizontally. When you enable the Scrolled Programs option, however, you will have one long scrolling menu with arrows that let you access menu items that won't fit on your screen. You might find this especially useful if you have a large number of programs installed on your computer.

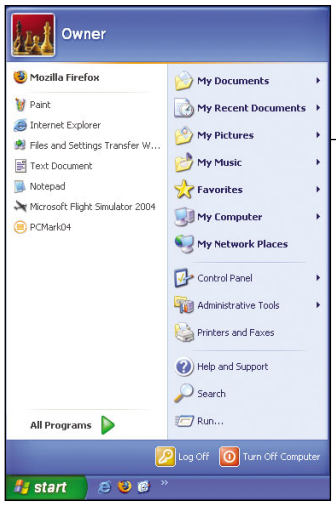
You will find on the Advanced tab under the



Windows XP's default Start menu looks much different from the Start menu in previous Windows versions. You can change the default Start menu setup to the Classic Start menu by accessing the Taskbar And Start Menu Properties dialog box.

Recent Documents area options that relate to your recently accessed files. You are used to the Start menu providing access to applications you used recently, so why shouldn't it serve up a list of documents you have accessed recently, as well?

Select the List My Most Recently Opened Documents checkbox. When you do this, Windows adds a My Recent Documents submenu, which lists files you recently accessed, to the Start menu.



This is what our Start menu looked like after we made several customizations.

Get pinned. If you are using the WinXP Start menu, you are familiar with the area at the top of the Start menu where Windows typically lists your browser and email client. You can add any program to this area for easy access. To do this, open the Start menu, select All Programs, and navigate to the program you want to add. Instead of launching the program, right-click it and select Pin To Start Menu. In addition to appearing in All Programs, the program will also appear with the group of programs situated at the top of the Start menu. Pinning a program to the Start menu is a useful way to make sure two or three of your most favorite applications are always within reach.

If you decide later to remove the program from the Start menu, right-click the program in the list and select Unpin From Start Menu; if you are removing a browser or email client, you will choose Remove From This List.

Classic Start Menu

If you cut your teeth on Windows 95/98/Me, you may prefer using the Classic Start menu instead of the default WinXP Start menu. Return to the Taskbar And Start Menu Properties dialog box and select the Classic Start Menu radio button. This option changes the look and behavior of the Start menu to mimic those earlier versions of Windows.

The Classic Start menu is less flashy, but it offers an equally useful way to navigate your system. In Classic mode, My Computer, My Network Places, and Internet Explorer icons appear on your Desktop instead of in the Start menu (which is how the Start menu appears in earlier Windows versions). Other features, such as pinning, aren't available in the Classic Start menu mode.

If you click the Customize button directly across from the Classic Start Menu radio button, you can access a handful of customization options, some of which are very different from those available with the standard Start menu. You can add items to or remove them from the Classic Start menu with the click of a button. You can also select checkboxes under the Advanced Start Menu Options heading to hide or display your Favorites, choose small or large icons, and opt for items that open as submenus.

Taskbar Tweaks

The Start menu, no matter which version you choose to use, is not an island. Rather, it sits on the Taskbar, which has a few settings of its own. The Taskbar is also home to the Quick Launch toolbar and the System Tray.

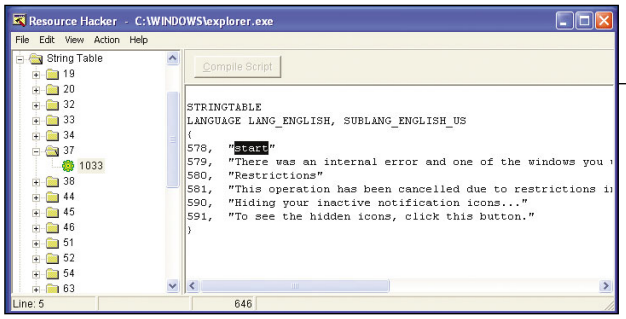
To configure Taskbar settings, you need to access the Taskbar And Start Menu Properties dialog box and select the Taskbar tab. One cool feature we like in this tab is the Auto-Hide The Taskbar option. When you select this checkbox, the Taskbar and Start menu will fade into the edges of your Desktop when you are not using them. To reveal each one, you only need to move your mouse pointer to the edge of the display.

If you want to have a little more say about the location of your Taskbar, you can move it. Deselect the Lock The Taskbar checkbox and click OK. You can now click and drag your Taskbar to any of the four edges of your Desktop. We think it is quite convenient to put our Taskbar on the right or left side of our display and then enable Auto-Hide.

In addition to placing your Taskbar wherever you want on your Desktop, you can also change the size of the Taskbar. Click the inside edge of the Taskbar and drag it to the size you want; you can resize it to take up as much as half of your Desktop. After you're happy with the Taskbar's size and position, you may want to lock it in place so no one moves it accidentally.

Quick Launch toolbar. If there are programs or folders you access often, you can save shortcuts to any of them in your Quick Launch toolbar, which is located on the Taskbar. This toolbar also reduces the amount of time it takes you to navigate the Start menu and open those programs or folders. To enable the Quick Launch toolbar, right-click the Taskbar, select Toolbars, and click Quick Launch.

System Tray. The System Tray (aka Notification Area in WinXP) is an essential tool for most users, but if you need more room on your Taskbar, you can hide the clock and inactive System Tray icons to reduce



Resource Hacker reveals all sorts of text in Windows that you can change. We are about to change how our Start button appears by typing in a new phrase.

Third-Party Start Tweaks

A number of clever programs can make your Start button do things that Microsoft never intended, or replace it with something completely different.

NextSTART ($24.95; www.winstep.net) removes the Start menu entirely, replacing it with a powerful and customizable menu system. It works with Windows 95/98/Me/NT 4.0/2000/XP.

Start Toys (free; www.bprasetio.or.id/downloads.php?param=&op=detail&id=35) lets you change the text, color, and style of the Start button in Win95/98.

TuneUp WinStyler ($24.90; www.tune-up.com) lets you change the look of many facets of WinXP, including the Start button.

clutter. Just access the Taskbar And Start Menu Properties dialog box and deselect the Show The Clock checkbox or select the Hide Inactive Icons checkbox and click OK.

Change The Name

Here's a riddle: If you change the word "Start" in the Start menu to something else, is it still called the Start menu? You can ponder this yourself as you modify WinXP's Start menu text. This can be a bit tricky but is worth the effort if you really want naming rights to the Start menu.

Before you begin, however, you need a program that lets you edit Windows resource files. Resource Hacker (www.users.on.net/johnson/resourcehacker) is a good, free choice. Next, you need to back up the Explorer.exe program, usually located in C:\WINDOWS. Just make a copy in the same directory and name it Explorercustom.exe so the original executable file will be available if anything goes awry.

Start Resource Hacker and open C:\WINDOWS\Explorercustom.exe. Next, find and change the "Start" text. Click the plus sign (+) to expand String Table and then expand the 37 folder and the 1033 folder. In the right pane, you'll see some text. Select the word "Start" (but not the quotes around it) and type in another name. Click the Compile Script button to save your changes and choose Save from the File menu.

Finally, you need to modify the Windows Registry so Windows uses your new text. To launch the Registry Editor, click Start, select Run, type **regedit** in the Open field, and click OK. Before going further, back up the Registry by selecting Export from the File menu, giving the exported file a File Name, and clicking Save. If you make any mistakes in the Registry, you can import that file to return things to normal.

Drill down to HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE\SOFTWARE\MICROSOFT\WINDOWS NT\CURRENTVERSION\WINLOGIN. Select the WinLogin key and double-click Shell in the right pane. Change the Explorer.exe Value Data to Explorercustom.exe, click OK, and then close the Registry Editor. After you restart the PC, the menu will have its new name.

Other Windows Versions

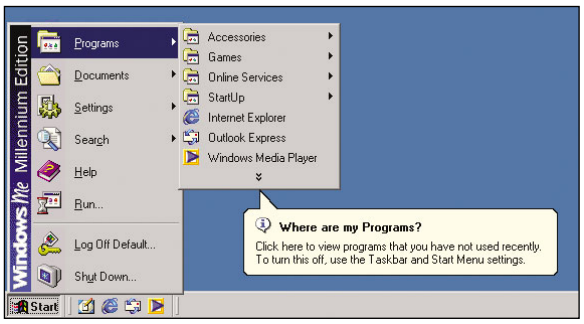
You can customize the Start menu in other versions of Windows, too. The other OSes don't offer as many adjustments as WinXP, but there are still plenty of ways to make Windows work the way you want it to work.

In WinMe, right-click an empty area on the Taskbar and select Properties to reveal the Taskbar And Start Menu Properties dialog box. (This dialog box is also available from the Control Panel.) In Win98, click Start, select Settings, and click Taskbar & Start Menu. Then, in either Win98/Me, under the General tab you can opt to autohide the Taskbar and display smaller icons in the Start menu, just like in WinXP.

In WinMe, you also have the Use Personalized Menus tool. When you select this feature, Windows keeps the Programs menu uncluttered by hiding programs that you haven't used recently. To reveal the hidden programs, just click the arrows at the bottom of each menu.

Clicking the Advanced (in WinMe) or Start Menu Programs (in Win98) tabs reveals more toolbar tweaks. Depending on the version of Windows you are using, you can add programs to and remove them from the Start menu, move or resize the Taskbar, and choose which items will appear in the Start menu and which will expand automatically when you click them.

If you've been busy lately and are interested in clearing out some clutter, take note of the Clear button while you're looking at the Advanced tab. Clicking the Clear button removes from your computer any records of the programs, files, and Web sites you have recently accessed.



Windows Me's Personalized Menus tool hides the programs that you don't use very often.

Now You're Started

It doesn't take long to make the Windows Start menu and Taskbar look and behave in ways that perfectly suit your work habits and personal preferences. You can do away with the icons that you never use, get easier access to the programs that you do use, and generally unclutter the place. But you're just getting started; there are many other aspects of Windows that you can tune and tweak. Check out the next few articles for more customization ideas. **PCT**

by Kevin Savetz